

If someone asks what the initials “USDA” stand for, most Iowans will automatically respond “United States Department of Agriculture.” After all, Iowa has long prospered on the strength of its agricultural roots, and the United States Department of Agriculture has played a large role in the affairs of our state. Given recent events in Washington, however, it would be understandable if someone were to reply that “USDA” stood for “United States Department of Amnesty.”

This is because the Obama administration has enlisted the Agriculture Department to help further its high-pressure, high-profile sales pitch for illegal immigrant amnesty. How else to explain the grossly erroneous claims Secretary Vilsack recently made to the Politico about the effect of illegal labor on food prices? This is what Secretary Vilsack told the paper, speaking of illegal immigrants:

*“But, if you didn’t have these folks, you would be spending a lot more- **three, four or five times more** , for food, or we would have to import food and have all the food security risks. Neither is what Americans want. What they want is what we have. Which is why we need comprehensive immigration reform.”*
(Emphasis added).

His claim about food prices being “three, four, or five times more” without illegal immigrant labor is markedly false, and Secretary Vilsack should know better. In fact, I would encourage him to check with the Department he heads before he repeats this sales pitch to the public. Otherwise, he just might get accused of dishonest sales practices.

For clarification, here is what Secretary Vilsack’s own Department of Agriculture has to say on the subject of illegal immigrant labor and food prices. Data compiled by the Department of Agriculture and the Bureau of Labor Statistics show that labor costs only represent six-percent of the price consumers pay for fresh fruits and vegetables, the market in which illegal immigrant labor is most prevalent.

If illegal alien labor accounts for only 6% of the total cost of fresh food, how could the absence of their labor possibly lead to food price spikes of 300%, 400%, or 500% as Secretary Vilsack claims? It couldn’t. Secretary Vilsack simply isn’t playing straight with you as he tries to sell you

on “comprehensive immigration reform.”

But suppose we were to give Secretary Vilsack and the Obama administration the benefit of the doubt, and assume that illegal alien labor costs did play a more significant role in setting food prices. The Center for Immigration Studies concluded in a 2007 report that even if farm wages were to rise by 40%, consumer spending on fresh fruit and vegetables would only be increased by a total of \$8 per American per year. This is hardly the doomsday scenario conjured up by Secretary Vilsack’s misleading, pro-amnesty claims. In fact, many Americans would willingly pay an extra \$8/year to enforce the immigration laws, knowing that doing so would result in savings many times greater in other areas of government.

Although Secretary Vilsack pretends to be speaking to “what Americans want”, he is really just delivering a sales pitch on behalf of an immigration policy that continues to be overwhelmingly rejected by Americans. If he were truly interested in discussing “what Americans want”, Secretary Vilsack would begin by discussing the need to increase border security, the need to fund the completion of a border fence, and the need to increase enforcement of the immigration laws that are already on the books.

The fact that he prefers to spin yarns about the price of produce tells you everything you need to know about what the Obama administration’s priorities truly are. Americans should insist that the USDA get out of the business of amnesty and return to the business of agriculture.